Embedded Research: revamping the humanities through organizational ethnography?

In this article I discuss the potential and difficulties of a new research method for humanities-based qualitative research in organisations: embedded research. I do so by drawing on my experience (between 2012 and 2014) as an embedded researcher in a humanities-based research group conducting intensive ethnographic research among creative firms in Amsterdam. The official aim of this research group was to mobilize the humanities’ tradition of thinking about narrative, aesthetics, symbols and meaning in order to better understand the new practices of the creative industries. Its unofficial aim, however, was to access new sources of funding for the humanities by convincing firms in the creative industries to offer assignments to junior researchers. The research group with which this article is concerned was the first in the Netherlands to apply the method of embedded research. Subsequently, this method was adopted by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, which is the main public provider of funding for academic research in the Netherlands.

Based on my experience in two such embedded research projects (see Sihvonen & Cnossen, forthcoming; Cnossen & Olma, 2014), each of which lasted approximately a year, I discuss in what ways the format of embedded research obstructed or enhanced the reflexivity in the ethnographic researcher. Apart from my own intensive fieldwork, I draw on the experiences of the other researchers in this group with whom I regularly reflected on our ongoing research projects. The analysis of the interrelations between this novel research format and reflexivity runs along the following lines. In the first place, I will describe what role reflexivity plays in generating academically interesting research given that embedded researchers are expected to “make humanities based research contributions to the development of a specific product or service”1. Second, I will discuss how the different set-ups of the research projects led to different degrees of entanglement with the organization where research was conducted (Fayard & Van Maanen, 2015) and how this entanglement, in some cases, started to shape the discourses and practices of these organizations. Third, I will discuss the role of reflexivity in dealing with the difficulties and opportunities that embedded researchers encounter when conducting research in organizations undergoing a radical change, e.g. bankruptcy (Dawson, 2014).

Based on these three themes (researchers contributing to products/services, entanglement with the organisation, and radical change of the organisation) I will argue that embedded research and reflexivity can only co-exist when the organization where the researcher is based, is willing to adopt a reflexive attitude as well. I will illustrate this point with examples from the fieldwork where reflexivity was actively avoided or established by the hosting organizations, and will conclude by discussing the various forms or attitudes such organisational reflexivity might take.

1 http://circa.uva.nl/about-circa
References


